

Historians Piece It All Together

By Debra A. Blake *

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 48: 2 (spring 2009).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

It may seem impossible in 2009 to know much about North Carolinians who lived in the 1700s. It's hard—but not impossible. Finding out small bits of information and putting them together to understand the past is what historians do. Reading and studying government documents—such as wills, marriage records, court minutes, and more—helps historians, students, and genealogists understand what life was like in the past. Each document gives clues about the person who created it. Through their research into such primary sources, historians follow clues to create a snapshot of past lives and places.

Detectives investigating a crime do the same thing when they follow clues until they form a picture of what happened.

Let's look at an example of historical document research that we'll call "the case of Mary Porter's will." A *will* is a document left by a person who has died that explains how he or she wants their property to be divided. Mary Porter lived in early northeastern North Carolina (in the Albemarle region). She was a fairly ordinary woman, but when she died in 1717, she left an extraordinary will. It is an extraordinary document for several reasons. For one thing, it is a will written by a woman, which was rare for the time period. Also, it is the will of a wealthy woman who carefully lists her various bequests, or gifts to other people. By studying this document, historians can learn about the lives of wealthy people in the early 1700s.

You can find wills and other government documents in places like the North Carolina State Archives. There are millions of documents in the archives, and historians often study them. They might have to analyze many different documents before any picture of the past becomes clear, since each document will give only a few clues.

The first step in our history detective work is to examine Mary Porter's will itself carefully, to see what information can be learned from it. The document was written on November 12, 1717. Porter states that she is a widow of "sound and perfect memory." She does not say that she is ill or old. In the body of the will, she mentions her children: sons, John, Edmund, and Joshua; and daughters, Elizabeth and Sarah. Sarah is married and has three daughters of her own: Elizabeth, Mary, and Sarah. At least one of the Porter sons is married and has a son, John, and another son has a daughter, Sarah. All of Porter's listed grandchildren are younger than eighteen. It is interesting to note that this family has a habit of repeating names in each generation. This practice can often cause confusion as to which person is being referred to in a document! Mary Porter's will was presented in court for probate—the process of making it legal—on January 21, 1718, which means that she died between November and January.

We can tell that Mary Porter was a slave owner with a great deal of personal property, which she carefully divides between her children. *Personal property* is everything that a person owned that was not land, which is *real property*. The will is very long and lists many interesting belongings that Mary felt were important enough to leave to someone—everything from chairs and spoons to pillowcases and shovels. She owned livestock and had crops in the field. She had some property in naval stores. The will mentions only one piece of real property, left to Mary's son Joshua. From the will, we learn that her son Edmund was not in North Carolina at the time but might have been on his way back to the colony.

Where can the history detective go to get more information about Mary Porter? She died almost three hundred years ago, and there are no books on her life. But the Albemarle region of North Carolina was not heavily settled at the time. There should be secondary sources that mention the area's wealthy or powerful people. In fact, numerous secondary sources do mention the Porter family, especially Mary's husband, John. The Porters were a prominent family and connected themselves through marriages to other prominent families. Good secondary sources give *citations* in their notes and bibliographies that researchers can follow to more secondary and primary sources that those authors used in their own research. In this way, you can follow a trail to learn more and more.

Some primary sources also should be checked for information, although the fact that Mary Porter was a woman makes that search more difficult. During this period, women did not have strong voices in government. Their fathers and husbands usually managed their lives, especially money matters. Widows, or women whose husbands had died, were sometimes exceptions. Given the detail in Mary Porter's will, an inventory or an account of an estate sale would be a wonderful discovery, since it would give us a more extensive list of her belongings and a sense of their worth. (In an estate sale, a deceased person's property is sold, with the money received divided among their heirs or beneficiaries.) Other types of documents could offer the researcher a view into Mary Porter's life. Deeds would tell about any land she owned. Tax records would reveal who and what she paid taxes on. Court records would show any time that she came before the legal court.

One original document that might provide more detail about Mary Porter is her husband's will. Even though John Porter died before Mary did, his will indeed proves to be a great source of information about his wife. Reading both wills, written a few years apart, the historian realizes that John and Mary are married; they name each other as spouses, and they name the same children. John Porter names Mary as his executrix, along with his son John as executor. (These are the people who are supposed to make sure that the dead person's wishes are carried out.) He states that he is a merchant, and sick and weak. He mentions all of his children, including a son named Mathew. Since Mary Porter's will does not mention Mathew, the researcher faces a challenge. Did Mathew die between his father's and mother's wills? Was he John's son but not Mary's? Had Mary already settled a legacy, or inheritance, on Mathew, and therefore had no need to take care of him in her will? Clearly, Mathew Porter is a subject for future study.

John Porter mentions land that he owns, giving some of it to each of his male children, and he gives slaves to his female children. Another interesting piece of information that we gain from John Porter's will is that he died in London, England. Even though he wrote the will in January

of 1710 in Albemarle County, it was probated in England in February of 1712. What he was doing in England is another subject worth investigating. (Several secondary sources provide information about this very subject.) Additional information learned from John Porter's will is that Joshua and Mathew were not yet twenty-one years old in 1710; daughter Sarah already was married to John Lillington; and daughter Elizabeth was not yet eighteen.

Another primary source that Mary Porter's will leads us to check involves the piece of real property that she leaves to one son. In July 1717, a few months before she died, Mary received a land grant—a deed for property bought from the government—for 264 acres. This is the same property left in her will to Joshua. A look in the deed books shows more deeds in which Porter sold slaves to her son in 1715. The will tells us other things, like the fact that Mary Porter had an American Indian slave or servant woman named Judith. This raises questions, such as whether enslavement of American Indians was common in that area at the time. Since John Porter did not mention Judith in his will, it would be interesting to know how and when Mary Porter acquired Judith.

The will tells us that Mary's son Edmund was not "in this Government," but it is not clear whether this means North Carolina or the colonies in general. Where was he, and why? This detail leads to a real story that you can learn about Edmund Porter, as well as his father, John, and brother John. The three men were involved in Cary's Rebellion and forced to leave the colonies because of this involvement. (See what else you can find out!)

As you have seen through this study of the case of Mary Porter's will, a researcher can discover a lot from one primary source. But there is more work to do. One document will lead to more documents. This slow gathering of information allows the historian to develop a picture of the past that might not be seen otherwise. Primary documents are the direct connection to history. Someday, historians will learn about life in 2009 in much the same way.

*At the time of this article's publication, Debra A. Blake was the manager of the Public Services Branch at the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History. She has written numerous articles and given many lectures on using the primary sources available at the State Archives.

The first part of Mary Porter's will

“In the Name of God Amen, this 12th day of November, 1717 I Mary Porter of Chowan precinct in the County of Albemarle, in the province of North Carolina Widow being of sound and perfect memory, doe make Constitue and ordaine Declare and apoint this to be my last Will and Testament Revokeing and annulling by these presents all former and other Will and Wills heretofore by me made in manner and form following Impts, I recomend my Soul into the hands of allmighty God who gave it and my body I comit to the earth to be Decently buried at the discretion of my Exors hereinafter named, Item I give and bequeath unto my well beloved Son John Porter my Negroe man knowne by the Name of Sandy half a dozen Rousia leather Chairs my oval Table large one midle Sized pewter dish, 2 large pewter basons and a Shovel and tongs tipped with Brass Item I give and bequeath unto my well beloved Son Edmund Porter my Negroe man knowne by the name of Oliver one large plank chest one Silver Drinking cup with 2 handles half a dosen Silver Spoons one large China bason already in his possession the large pair of Tongs and Shovel one bedstead one wooden couch the largest of the Small looking glasses the large Cedar table half a dosen painted Chairs and my whole Stock of hoggs that I shall leave at my decease After my Debts and legacys paid and one pair of Iron Doggs, 50 # weight of feathers and all the money due to me lying in the hands of Mr. Welstead and Oliver, Merchts, in Boston he paying out of the sd. money within Six Months After the receiving it unto my beloved Daughter, Eliz. Porter Six Silver Spoons each weighing Ten Shillings Sterling at least, and one Iron pot & pot hooks and 12 Soup plates But it is my Will and pleasure that if the sd Edmund shall not be in this Government at my decease that then and in Such Case all and every of the Legacys here left to the sd. Edmund shall remain in the Exors hands hereafter Named until his arrival here or until he shall impower any person After my Decease to take and receive the Same and if it shall happen that the sd. Edmund Shall never arrive here nor Impower any person as Aforsd. after my Decease then all & every of the Legacys Afrsd. I give and bequeath to my Sons John Porter and Joshua Porter and to my Daughter Eliz: Porter to be equally divided amongst them, Item I give and bequeath unto my Wel beloved Son Joshua Porter a tract of Land lying in Yawpim . . . “

*--Transcription courtesy of Debra A. Blake. For a full transcription, access
www.greatdreams.com/henry/porter-wills.htm.*